



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Out of the Chervis

**Citation for published version:**

Gorringe, H 2016, 'Out of the Chervis: Dalits contesting and creating public space in Tamil Nadu', *Space and Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 164-176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331215623216>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1177/1206331215623216](https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331215623216)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Space and Culture

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

The final version of this paper has been published in Space and Culture, 19/2, May/2016 by SAGE Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © Hugo Gorringe, 2016. It is available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1206331215623216>

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



*This is a pre-proofed version of a paper published in Space and Culture: Gorringe, H. 2015. 'Out of the Cheris: Dalits Contesting and Creating Public Space in Tamil Nadu', Space & Culture DOI: 10.1177/1206331215623216*

**Title:** Out of the *Cheris*: Dalits Contesting and Creating Public Space in Tamil Nadu

**Author:** Hugo Gorringe

**Affiliation:** University of Edinburgh

**Address:** Sociology,  
University of Edinburgh,  
22 George Square  
Edinburgh EH8 9LD,  
Scotland, UK.  
[H.Gorringe@ed.ac.uk](mailto:H.Gorringe@ed.ac.uk)

**Biographical Note:** Hugo Gorringe is a Sociology lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. He is author of '*Untouchable Citizens: The Dalit Panthers and Democratisation of Tamilnadu*', New Delhi, Sage 2005, and articles on Dalit movements and violence, identity politics and political participation.

**Title:** Out of the *Cheris*: Dalits Contesting and Creating Public Space in Tamil Nadu

**Abstract:**

Dalits (ex-Untouchables) in Tamil Nadu, as in many other places of India, have historically resided in '*cheris*' or settlements set apart from the village or '*oor*'. *Cheris* often lack amenities like schools, ration shops, health centres or *panchayat* buildings and are set off the main road down poorly lit and surfaced roads. This emphasises the significance of space and the spatiality of social relations to the caste system. As Dalits in Tamil Nadu have mobilised politically, therefore, they have challenged the hierarchical nature of social space. In their encroachments into such spaces, they have sought to create meaningful public spaces that are open to, and representative of, all castes. Their challenges to existing socio-political relations, however, has fuelled a backlash by castes with higher social status who often resort to violence to retain their social standing. This paper concerns the Dalit contestations over space and the wider ramifications of such struggles in the socio-political sphere. The paper argues that the process of democratisation requires alterations to social and well as political spaces and institutions.

**Key Words:** Caste; Space; Hierarchy; Democracy; Violence

The Tamil blockbuster ‘Madras’ (Pa Ranjith, 2014) has all the ingredients of a popular Tamil film: fight sequences, song and dance routines and a troubled romance. What sets it apart, however, is its foregrounding of an emergent Dalit political culture in the state. The hero, stereotypically, is bold and fearless. Unusually, however, the protagonist is a Dalit youth with links to politics and a desire to empower others through education. The film revolves around disputes over stretch of wall that political parties use to advertise candidates and events. The upshot is an intense power struggle which takes both spatial and political forms. At the heart of the film are two social processes that form the focus of this paper: firstly a resurgent politics of caste in which Dalits are key players; and secondly the central and continuing significance of social space to caste.

The notion that everyone knew and accepted their place in caste society (cf. Moffatt 1979) has never mapped onto reality. Protests against caste have taken multiple forms, including migration or flight (Adas 1991). These strategies foreground the importance of space, but ‘the constitutive role of space in the institution of untouchability and in Dalit political mobilization’ has been understudied (Rawat 2013: 1060). This omission is surprising given that the regulated nature of caste-based habitation and interaction has helped naturalise caste hierarchy despite challenges to it. Social relations underpinning caste, in other words, are spatialised (Gorringe 2005; Rawat 2013). It would, however, be mistaken to conclude that peoples’ consciousness reflects this patterning in an unproblematic fashion. The ubiquity of social sanctions against caste transgressions undermine portrayals of caste as a harmonious or unchallenged social structure (Rafanell and Gorringe 2010). Indeed, disputes over status and challenges to caste hegemony have often been articulated through practices that questioned the cartography of caste.

A popular Paraiyar (a Scheduled Caste<sup>1</sup> – formerly untouchable - in Tamil Nadu) legend recounts that as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Nandanar – a leather worker and temple devotee – desired to enter the temple in Chidambaram and worship Siva. Denied access due to his lowly status, Nandanar purified himself in a pit of fire. As he was consumed by the flames he is said to have assumed the form of a Brahmin sage and been granted the right to touch Siva’s feet (Basu 2011: 23). Whilst the legend ultimately reinforces the notion of differential access to sacred spaces, there is an implicit challenge to the established order in the assertion that a Paraiyar may be a sage and access sacred sites. Myths of this nature abound, but movements of ex-untouchables today *openly* contest their exclusion from sacred spaces and mobilise in large numbers to demand entry to the Siva temple in Chidambaram and elsewhere. Rather than committing themselves to fire, they set the Laws of Manu alight and promise to turn the land ‘on its head’ (Interview Tamizh Murasu, May 2012).

This paper draws on participant observation, interviews and media reports to highlight the changing nature of caste in Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup> There is a long history of Dalit protest in the state, but there has been an upsurge since 1990 as Dalit movements challenged the ability of the two main political (Dravidian) parties in the state to represent their interests. In 1999, the *Viduthalai Ciruthaigal Katchi* (VCK - Liberation Panther Party) - the largest Dalit movement in Tamilnadu, South India – contested elections and began the process of institutionalising themselves as a party (Wyatt 2009). Gamson (1990: 28-9) argues that social movements aim at two basic outcomes: *acceptance* as political players and the securing of *new advantages* for participants. His focus, however, is on institutional politics and he neglects the fact that democracy is a

process that is played out within society as much as it is acted out in parliamentary institutions (Mitchell 2009). Dalit actors and parties such as the VCK, thus, have sought both to democratise Indian politics by making it more representative of, and accountable to, the population at large, *and* to democratise social relations by moving away from hierarchical relations and social arrangements. Dalit assertion, thus, arises within the *cheris* (Dalit settlements on the outskirts of villages or Dalit housing estates and colonies in urban areas) and the experiences of *cheri* life (cf. Rawat 2013) and yet stakes claims to public space. In so doing, they challenge the hegemonic social relations and spatial patterns which sediment that dominance. Implicit in their struggle is the assertion that full citizenship remains a chimera whilst certain castes have preferential access to certain spaces and places.

**Following** Mitchell's (2011: 476) call for scholars to 'recognise and take seriously the other [non-hegemonic] sorts of spaces and communicative channels used for political communication', this paper charts Dalit contests and protests over space and place in contemporary Tamil Nadu. As with the contested stretch of wall in *Madras* the movie, Dalit political actors are engaged in forms of political expression and action that challenge taken-for-granted ways of being. For the castes just above the Dalits in the social hierarchy, Dalit mobilisation is perceived as an erosion of authority that entails a decline in status and a blow to self-esteem (Vincentnathan 1996). As Dalits have expanded their repertoire of political action, therefore, intermediate castes have mobilised in their turn. Whilst much caste politics is played out in meeting halls, online forums and discursive practices, altercations in and over social space offer insights into caste dynamics. This paper, therefore, charts the interplay between Dalit assertion, social space and caste politics in Tamil Nadu. We start with an overview of the interplay between space and democratisation before looking at caste and politics in the state and reflecting on several disputes over space before concluding with a reflection of the interplay between space, power and caste.

### **Democratising Caste Space**

Lefort describes democratisation as the gradual 'dissolution of the markers of certainty' that made existing institutions of power, and the hierarchical nature of social relations appear natural and pre-determined (1988: 19). In a democratising society, therefore, all social spaces are potential sites of contestation. From temples to walls the meanings inscribed in, and ascribed to, particular places and spaces are being challenged, reinvented or reinforced. In this process the dynamics of caste change are written into the social landscape such that seemingly minor incidents can be inflamed out of proportion: the ostentatious display of a party flag can invite a riot; a love marriage can occasion arson; and changing a road-side sign can entail fisticuffs and a legal battle. It would, this reminds us, be mistaken to assume that the path to a democratic society will be trouble-free or linear. Rather, we need to 'recognise the contingent, open, and indeterminate character of democratic practices and spaces' (Low 2009: 130).

As challenges to the established order invite a violent backlash it becomes clear that domination is played out in and through spatial practices. This is, of course, not unique to caste:

Discipline proceeds by the organisation of individuals in space, and it therefore requires a specific enclosure of space. In the hospital, the school, or the military field, we find a reliance on an orderly grid. Once established, this grid permits the sure distribution of the individuals to be disciplined and supervised; this procedure facilitates the reduction of

dangerous multitudes or wandering vagabonds to fixed and docile individuals (Dreyfus and Rainbow 1982: 154-5).

In a caste context, the *cheri*, government constructed colony or urban estate similarly serve to identify and marginalise Dalits. All ideologies, as Lefebvre (1991: 129) notes, 'project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself'. Harvey (1989) likewise argues that this symbolic order shapes patterns of thought and action that reproduce the dominant order. Rawat (2013: 1060) correspondingly observes that Dalits' collective experience of living in *jati muhallas* (*cheris*) 'shapes and mediates their consciousness'. Untouchability, Ambedkar<sup>3</sup> insisted, 'is a case of territorial segregation' (in Rao 2009: 126). Rather than viewing challenges to caste norms as new and problematic, this reveals the constructed and essentially contested nature of space. Social spaces, as Shields (1991: 51) notes, are 'a material realisation of creative design and labour power. But the spatial is also a condensation of the social relations of its production'. As these social relations are transformed, 'changing caste and class relations are articulated through a politics of space that often (re)creates rather than dissolves boundaries and localities' (Donner and De Neve 2006: 13).

In recognition of the shifting terrain of socio-political relations, Hansen (2004: 24) emphasised the importance of 'performances and spectacles in public spaces' if we wish to understand how Indian democracy works. Mitchell (2011) also highlights the need to integrate extra-institutional protest and mobilisation into our analysis, since they function as important media of communication. She points to the routinisation of road and rail blockades in the political repertoire 'as a sign of Indian democracy's success in recognising and incorporating participation from beyond the bourgeois public sphere' (2011: 492). Indeed, such recognition of, and response to, a group's actions by state representatives may be read as marking their 'political arrival' (Mitchell 2014). This evokes Chatterjee's recognition that the strategic use of violence by members of what he terms 'political society' may be followed by their 'inclusion into the ambit of governmentality' (2004: 76). Chatterjee (2004) argues that subaltern groups lacking the knowledge, legitimacy and access to law, that characterises members of 'civil society', may resort to extra-legal collective action to secure rights and recognition. Analysis of democratisation, it follows, must scrutinise state responses as well as the actions of challengers.

Jaoul's (2006) work on symbolic politics in Uttar Pradesh offers a template for such analysis. His ethnographic data highlight the means by which Dalit activists sought not just to install statues in favoured locations but to secure state sanction for them by inviting dignitaries, utilising connections and mobilising supporters:

'The inaugurations, mimicking official unveiling ceremonies, highlighted their authority. The symbolic control of the village's public space was a daring assertion, which the upper castes perceived as a threat, even an insult, often provoking confrontations and sometimes even the destruction of the statue' (Jaoul 2006: 195).

In occupying space and securing official recognition, such symbolic politics not only undermine traditional hierarchies, Rodrigues (2009: 109) argues, but also to obtain the 'acknowledgement of some kind of equality across all who gather together' in such space. The increased visibility of

Dalit icons and concerns in both social and political spheres, as Rao (2009: 272) notes, 'reflects the success of Dalit claims to human recognition'. Simultaneously, however, Jaoul suggests and Rao (2009: 116) demonstrates how Dalit challenges to caste institutions occasioned violence and 'generated novel technologies of segregation'. Contests over access to public space and symbolic disputes over the content of such spaces (billboards, posters, wall paintings and statues for example), thus, emerged as central to Dalit struggles for representation (Gorringe 2005: 199). Whilst Mitchell (2014: 521) notes that 'political arrival' may result in 'recognition and the right to visibility in the public arena', therefore, it is clear that the process is neither inevitable nor smooth. 'What is promised in the political realm', Guru (2009: 223) asserts, 'is summarily denied in the social'. In what follows, therefore, we chart the contest processes by which Tamil Dalit movements seek to realise the promises of democratic participation.

### **Caste, Space and Politics in Contemporary Tamil Nadu**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2012, several hundred 'Most Backward Caste'<sup>4</sup> Vanniyars stormed into three Dalit *cheris* (residential areas also known as colonies) in the Dharmapuri District of North-Western Tamilnadu where they looted, burned and destroyed Dalit property. The houses of affluent Dalits were particularly badly hit, but vehicles, bicycles and consumer goods were all targeted. Around 285 huts were torched and many were gutted since roads had been blocked to prevent fire tenders from arriving at the scene. There were some police officers present, but they were outnumbered and, cowed into inaction, looked on as mute spectators. The ostensible trigger for the violence was a cross caste-marriage between a Vanniyar woman and a Dalit man. When her father was unable to persuade her to break off the marriage he reportedly committed suicide from shame and this spurred the Vanniyars to exact 'revenge'.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst Vanniyars were keen to portray the violence in Dharmapuri as an emotional outpouring in response to a family matter, analysis of the wider socio-political context reveals it to be part of a pattern of violence prompted by Dalit politicisation.<sup>6</sup> Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 51-53) refer to the tendency for higher castes to react with disproportionate force to any indication of Dalit assertion as 'extravagant revenge'. The formation of autonomous parties has drawn Dalit votes away from established players and changed the political dynamics in the state (Wyatt 2010). Dominant castes used to count upon subaltern votes, but as their hegemony has faltered they have had to pursue alternate strategies and have viewed the upward mobility of those beneath them in the caste hierarchy with consternation (De Neve and Carswell 2011). In the 2010s, the Vanniyar dominated *Paatali Makkal Katchi* (PMK – Toiling People's Party) attempted to shore up its failing vote-base by reviving the caste card. Cross-caste marriages and the 'abuse' of anti-caste legislation by Dalits were cited by intermediate caste leaders as reasons for counter-mobilisation (Interviews with Sannah, Tamizh Murasu & Rajangam 2012; cf. Pandian 2013).

Srinivas (1966: 98) observed how mobility aspirations frequently become 'interwoven with pre-existing rivalries between local castes; this had the effect of intensifying the rivalries'. He cautioned analysts to distinguish between 'the urge to be one step ahead of one's structural neighbours ... [and] a general movement toward equality'. The emergence of Dalit politics has seen this dialectical relationship played out between Dalits and intermediate castes in Tamil Nadu. As VCK General Secretary, Ravikumar, notes: Melavalavu – scene of an horrendous anti-

Dalit massacre in 1997 – was peaceful until Dalits sought to claim their political rights (2009: 179). It is when their dominance and/or status is challenged that intermediate castes resort to violence (cf. Rao 2009). The desire to remain one step ahead of upwardly mobile Dalits is apparent in the public speeches to Vanniyar audiences of PMK Member of the Legislative Assembly and Vanniyar Sangam (Union) President, J. Guru. His oratory repeatedly stirs up caste sentiments. Unlike the classical orators celebrated by Bate (2009), Guru uses a colloquial and coarse Tamil that gives him the common touch. He urges his caste fellows to take pride in their history, warns them that Dalit assertion would see their ‘dwellings turn into *cheris* and they would treat *us* as untouchables’. He rages against political upstarts (a clear reference to the VCK) ‘who want to suppress all others as they rise. He wants your women to be his wife!’<sup>7</sup> The only protection against this, he stresses, is caste unity. In recent years, intermediate but socio-politically dominant castes such as the Vanniyars, Thevars and Gounders have campaigned against what they perceive as reverse casteism (Gorringe 2012). Initiatives such as the *All Community Protection Front (Anaithu Samuthaya Padukappu Peravai)* have united different caste groups against what they see as the ‘misuse’ of constitutional provisions for Dalits (Hindu 2012).

Tamil politics is shaped by the Dravidian movement which campaigned for social equality and against caste. What these political developments reveal, is that the social radicalism of the Dravidian parties - which have governed the state since 1967 – was strictly curtailed and did not extend to untouchables (Barnett 1976). The egalitarian rhetoric of the Dravidian parties masked their caste base (Subramanian 1999). Whilst the ‘constitution says all are equal’, Ravikumar points out, ‘civil society says, “We will not treat the untouchables as equals”’ (2009: 249). He notes how Dalits are excluded from the ‘commons’ and denied rights to bid for ‘common’ government resources such as tamarind trees. It has taken the mobilisation of radical movements for Dalits to secure ‘political arrival’ (Mitchell 2014). Their arrival on the political stage, however, has intensified rivalries and sparked a counter-movement in the socio-political sphere. Indeed, March 2012 witnessed the registration of the ‘Non-Dalit General People’s Welfare Association’ in the land of non-Brahminism. When pictures of a wall painting advertising the association went viral in early 2012 there was an outcry from politicians and academics, but the fact that the association was able to secure formal registration speaks volumes about caste polarisation in contemporary Tamil Nadu (Fieldnotes 2012).

This polarisation has fuelled a wave of anti-Dalit violence that illustrates the continuing spatialisation of caste. Since caste is a ‘notional entity’ (Ambedkar 2011), it is hard to identify someone’s caste from their appearance. Violence, therefore, has targeted Dalit *cheris* and estates. Where these locations used to be the deprived residential areas that Dalits retreated to at the end of a day working in the fields or houses of the locally dominant castes, however, transformations in employment, education and opportunities have altered how these spaces are perceived. Numerous recent studies have pointed to socio-economic mobility amongst Dalits (Shah et al. 2006; Heyer 2010). What this has meant is that *cheris* need not be synonymous with disadvantage. Pandian (2013) notes how conspicuous consumption of consumer goods and fashionable attire by Dalits acted as irritants for the Vanniyars in Dharmapuri. Furthermore, as Dalit writer Rajangam notes, Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu ‘have given Dalits the psychic strength to fight atrocities by themselves’ (2011: 245). Dalits are no longer too scared to fight



back or to demand rights of access and entry. As the 'moorings of caste begin to shift' (Heyer 2010), so too has the symbolism and discourses attached to *cheris*. From being overt indicators of exclusion, *cheris* now operate as sites of resistance and development; spaces in which challenges to caste germinate and flourish (cf. Rawat 2013).

### **Contested Caste Symbols**

Faced by increasing Dalit assertion, those above them in the caste hierarchy have responded by constructing private temples, using violence and building caste walls that shut Dalits off from their homes and streets. Caste relations, thus, continue to be expressed in spatial idioms and played out in social space. The shifting contours of caste space are to the fore in the case of Parali Puthur - a small hamlet in central Tamil Nadu - where similar scenes on a smaller scale were played out in 2011. Here the land-owning caste are Muthuraiyars – themselves of low caste status - who feel threatened by Dalit assertion. There are two salient points here. Firstly, the bounded nature of caste hierarchies is evident in relation to Muthuraiyars, since they themselves are treated as impure in the neighbouring district of Pudhukottai where they form a subservient minority. In Parali Puthur, however, by virtue of owning land they have a superior social standing (Fieldnotes 2012). Caste, this reminds us, is a relational system based on 'graded inequalities' (Ambedkar 2011). The second point of note was that violence here was a direct response to Dalit political engagement. Muthuraiyars objected to what they perceived as an ostentatious display of Dalit pride.

The immediate issue started with a wedding in the colony. Dalit villagers printed a big flex banner with Thirumavalavan [the VCK leader] on it, strung up party flags and tied a VCK flag to the top of the colony water tank which overlooks the main road into the village proper (*oor*). (Fieldnotes, 2012)

Angered by this overt display, a Muthuraiyar youth replaced the VCK flag with a caste one. Claiming and reclaiming space for a caste grouping is increasingly common (cf. Jaoul 2006). In rural Tamil Nadu it is not uncommon to see lamp-posts and mile-stones daubed in 'caste colours'. Affronted by the Muthuraiyar action, the encroaching flag was allegedly garlanded with chappals by Dalits which was taken as both an insult and a challenge. As with Dharmapuri, it is important to place the episode in context. Muthuraiyars, as a minority grouping that often faces discrimination, have witnessed the mobilisation of other castes with alarm. They see themselves as being left behind and outnumbered in a political sense and were in the midst of mobilising to erect a statue of a Muthuraiyar hero. In this context, the seemingly petty dispute over banners assumed greater significance. Spurred on by wounded caste pride and a fear of Dalit assertion, a Muthuraiyar crowd entered the *cheri*:

They smashed up buildings, set light to thatched extensions burning a number of goats alive and utterly demolished the raised platform on which a Board and Flag post of the VCK had been placed. A mound of rubble and brick was all that remained to testify to the substantial political insignia that had previously stood in the centre of the colony. Dalits feel that their affiliation to the VCK was what the Muthuraiyars could not stomach. They had deliberately chosen to install the board and flag *inside* the *cheri* rather than on the road

so as to avoid conflict, but the public show of resistance was seen as going too far. (Fieldnotes 2012).

Few Dalits in Parali Puthur depend on the Muthuraiyars for employment, but the latter group control local amenities. The declining dependence of Dalits has, thus, transformed *cheris* into sites of contestation. Lacking alternate means of reinforcing their social standing, Muthuraiyars saw violence as an effective 'communicative medium' (Rao 2009: 94). That existing rivalries have been sharpened by the political arrival of Dalits is revealed in the continued struggle by Dalit parties to secure social recognition despite their integration into political alliances.

In the village of Andukulam, Pudhukottai District, VCK representatives occupy the *cheri*. One must cross the main road to reach the village square and local shops and amenities are clustered on the far side. At the head of a pond in the common square stands a collection of party flag-poles:

Six party flags fly there at present. One flag-pole has been taken down to be repainted but two poles have been broken or cut off at the base: those of the VCK and Puthiya Tamizhagam [New Tamil Nadu – a Dalit party]. The poles were torn down and disposed of – carried away or cast into the pond. Given the distance from the *cheri* to the square Tamizh Murasu [my companion] asked: 'Why not plant your flag on the road by the colony'. Local VCK leader Alagu responded: 'That would seem like we were scared or backing down. All other parties have their flags in the main square. Already they do not accept us as a common party or even cast us as a caste party. Placing our flag here would suggest we are just for Dalits or Paraiyars, but we are a mainstream party too!' (Fieldnotes 2012).

In her analysis of anti-Dalit violence in Maharashtra, Rao notes that the 'capture of Dalits' intimate space was a totem of victory, a sign of the reduction of Dalits' political presence' (2009: 201). Here we see how it is not just the ability to enter Dalit residential areas with impunity that matters, but the targeting of Dalit incursions into public space as well. In uprooting Dalit flags, the locally dominant caste are seeking to perpetuate their exclusion and reinforce the humiliating 'Dalit' prefix (Guru 2009) that marks parties led by Dalits as particular and incapable of universal thought and action.

### **Sites of Resistance**

Alagu's bold articulation of defiance, however, highlights processes of social change. Increasingly *cheris* are not just sites of contention but sites within which resistance is nurtured and Dalits emboldened. Some miles outside Allanganallur (Madurai District) lies the small hamlet of Melachinanampatti. In 2011 when Thirumavalavan launched a campaign on the Mullaiperiyar dam – which lies on the borders of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and is a source of constant disputes between the two states – Dalits here displayed a huge printed banner by the bus-stop in anticipation his visit. Dalit homes in the village are clustered around two side-streets leading off the road before it enters the main village. Their banner, therefore, was perceived as an encroachment into village space and was ripped down by caste-Hindus who saw it as an affront. With a visit by their leader imminent, Dalits voiced their anger, and this prompted a

clash between Dalits and BCs in which Dalit homes and villagers were injured. The bitter irony, as interviewees remarked, is ‘that Dalits here own no land, and so the main beneficiaries of the dam issue are the Gounders [locally dominant castes], but they will not recognise Thirumavalavan as a Tamil leader’ (Fieldnotes 2012).

Following the altercation, the Gounders installed a barbed-wire fence cutting off the *cheri*’s access to the fields where cattle can graze. The Dalits’ temerity in staking a claim to public space, thus, resulted in a reinforcement of caste boundaries. In considering the ‘politics of the governed’, thus, we should recognise the extra-legal and often violent means deployed by locally dominant actors. Struggles over caste, however, are no longer purely local. The multi-scalar nature of struggles over status and citizenship became evident when Dalit villagers were told to remove the VCK flag by the local Highways Department. Relations of caste and dominance have always operated at the local level (cf. Jeffrey 2005), but anti-caste activists now have recourse to higher authorities. The VCK, thus, raised the issue with District officials and insisted that: ‘if we are not allowed our flagpole on the road then you will have to remove all other flagpoles from the main road too’ (Fieldnotes 2012). Backed into a corner, the point was conceded. Consequently, when I visited in 2012 some of the houses still needed repairs, but a newly painted flagpole adorned with a picture of Thirumavalavan and a panther [the VCK symbol] stood on the road near the entrance to the *cheri*. As Lefebvre (1991: 245) argues: ‘Political space is not established solely by actions. The genesis of space of this kind also presupposes a practice, images, symbols and the construction of buildings, of towns and of localized social relationships’.

### **Caste Walls, Caste Dynamics**

Such assertion, as we have seen, has often occasioned a BC backlash. The methods employed, however, are not always violent. Uthapuram is a village in Madurai District where a dispute over Temple Entry arose. There are 600 members of the BC Pillai caste here and 400 Dalit (mostly Pallar) families. The social capital (cf. Jeffrey 2005) possessed by the Pillai caste affords them disproportionate power and influence in the locality. Dalit efforts to enter the temple in 1989, thus, were met with police firing. Subsequent to this the ‘Pillai caste constructed a wall preventing Dalit entry into the temple area’ and dividing their residences from those of the Dalits (Jeyaharan 2009: 84; Personal Communication). Caste differences, here, were rendered concrete. The Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) – a wing of the CPI(M) – charted the existence of multiple other forms of untouchability in the village including denial of worship and the pollution of the Dalit’s drinking water with sewage (Imranullah 2012; Samuel Raj Interview 2012).

Dalit political mobilisation, however, has disrupted local power structures. Protests by Dalit groups resulted in the sustained action of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and, ultimately, the intervention of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation, DMK) which was in office at the time. Part of the caste wall was demolished in 2008 as a result, following which the BCs ‘played defensively’: ‘The Pillai caste people withdrew into the forest region nearby as a mark of protest, and this invited the support from other castes who are against the Dalits’ (Jeyaharan 2009: 84). Jeyaharan, an academic, pastor and activist in Madurai argued that the Pillai caste were unable to respond violently because the

Dalits here have some land and autonomy. This means that they are not at mercy of landlords or needing to work every day. They were able to stand firm and had the basis for a sustained struggle. Additionally, the involvement of *national* level Communist leaders like Brinda Karat ensured greater scrutiny of local authorities (Personal Communication, February 2012).

Uthapuram has become synonymous with the contested processes of caste change and exemplifies the ‘constellations of power’ (Massey 1995) that shape social space. Early in 2011, for instance, when activists grew frustrated with the limited nature of change they again lobbied for temple entry. The response of the District Collector at the time was instructive: ‘this is a common issue’, he is reported to have said, ‘why make such a fuss?’ (Theekathir 2011). Anxious to avoid caste clashes, the state authorities banned protests in Uthapuram and arrested over a 1000 activists (800 in the City of Madurai) when they tried to force the issue (Dinamani 2011)<sup>8</sup>. It was only in June 2012, therefore, that Dalits finally entered the temple in a ceremony marked by intense security. This success owed much to the national publicity and the active intervention of the then Madurai Superintendent of Police Asra Garg (Karthikeyan 2012).

The idea that caste would wither away after independence has clearly proved to be a chimera; caste change requires sustained and active intervention. Indeed, after the media celebration of caste harmony in Uthapuram, activist lawyer Bhagat Singh noted that Dalits had entered the temple for the first photo-shoot but were subsequently persuaded to worship from outside (Interview, 2012). Even where ground is conceded, thus, dominant groups seek to retain markers of esteem. The protests and arrests in Madurai mentioned above, furthermore, emphasise that it is not just in rural areas or in response to dominant castes that Dalits mobilise. Moving to the city has long been seen as an escape route from discrimination, but that is not necessarily straightforward.

### **Signs of Change?**

Many respondents spoke of the problems they faced in trying to find housing in cities; of the subtle and not-so subtle questions designed to ascertain their caste background. Thorat and Newman (2010) similarly document the persistence of caste-based discrimination in urban India. With the rise of a Dalit middle class and the emergence of Dalit politics, however, the emphasis has extended beyond campaigns for formal political recognition. Increasingly, Dalit organisations seek wider inclusion and recognition in terms of the auctions of public goods (fish from common ponds or fruit grown on common land), in terms of government backed memorials for their heroes, and in terms symbolic markers like statues and place names (Kathikeyan and Gorringer 2012; Ravikumar 2009). The profusion of Ambedkar statues and Ambedkar Nagar colonies has given way to calls for more public recognition. Activists in Allanganallur (Madurai District), thus, lobbied for an Ambedkar bus-station (Thamizh Murasu, personal communication 2012). The key difference here is in the call for government rather than Dalit spaces to honour Ambedkar and other Dalit figures.

Alongside these claims to public space comes a greater sensitivity to exclusions from such space. In February 2013, for instance, the Madurai Corporation sought to spruce up the city ahead of a cultural festival. In anticipation of large crowds they installed new signboards on key routes. Corporation workers, however, failed to update the signage for Dr Ambedkar Road. Taken in

isolation this might be seen as an oversight, yet placed within a context in which Ambedkar statues in the city were vandalised in 2012 and the pre-eminent Dalit and national leader is routinely seen as lacking due recognition, this was read as a deliberate slight. The VCK was to the fore in protests highlighting this neglect. Elsewhere in India, the Dalit Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh – Mayawati - was castigated for spending huge sums of money on parks with statues of lower caste leaders, but Dalits visiting the sites described them as empowering (Loynd 2009). ‘Political arrival’, in other words, needs to be accompanied by social and cultural recognition if caste hierarchies are to be erased. The dispute over road-signs in Madurai encapsulates the ongoing struggles required to refashion public space (Karthikeyan 2013a).

Here, as Waghmore (2013) notes elsewhere, Dalit activists target the state both as an agent in their oppression *and* as a key resource. The dual strategies of condemnation and supplication/demands are ever present in the troubled relationship between Dalits and the state. The construction of housing for the Scheduled Castes is one arena in which this dynamic appears. On one hand, Dalit organisations demand state provision of affordable housing. On the other, they critique the construction of single-story, concrete, Dalit-only settlements as stymieing ambition and perpetuating caste segregation. Struggles over space, thus, are bound up with questions of *social* recognition and inclusion. Gamson’s (1990) focus on *political* outcomes in established democracies blinds him to the processual nature of democratisation. As the example of Uthapuram and Ambedkar Road highlight, however, political recognition need not equate to social acceptance (cf. Guru 2009). Dalit contests over space, thus, involve demands to be recognised as equal citizens.

### **Out of the *cheris*?**

When the VCK first contested elections in 1999, posters of Thirumavalavan were smeared with cow-dung in a symbolic humiliation (Gorringe 2005). Although the VCK remain marginal players - a ‘*Dalit*’ party – they have arrived politically and this has certain consequences. When I met with Pandiyammal, the Madurai District secretary of the VCK in 2012, for instance, we discussed her collection of photographs documenting protests, meetings and party events. One of the most striking images portrayed two police constables, sleeves rolled up and brushes in hand, cleaning up a VCK mural that had been defaced by detractors. This photo admirably captures the complex dynamics of socio-political change in caste society. It charts the rise of the Dalits from subordinates to activists – often dubbed dangerous extremists – to recognised players with an entitlement to air their views in public space (Fieldnotes 2012).

The film *Madras*, as we saw above, captures this ongoing process of caste change and negotiation in its focus on a wall used by competing political parties. With the rise of Dalit politics, Stalin Rajangam asserts, ‘this sphere of aesthetics becomes a political and contested space as Dalits too are engaging in occupation of public space through flex boards ... to make their presence visible’ (in Karthikeyan 2013b). Resistance to these attempt to realise rights to public space are legion, but are increasingly framed as oppressive. Clearly, debates over the category of ‘the public’ that animated the interwar years continue to resonate. In the process, as Rao (2009: 275) argues, ‘the increased salience of the caste body and the visibility of Dalits are mutually entailed by state structures of recognition and the politicization of public space, whether urban or rural’.

‘Ordinarily’, as Chatterjee (2004: 66) affirms, ‘governmental activity takes place within the stratified social structures of class, status and privilege’. It follows, therefore, that subaltern groups may need to resort to extra-institutional, perhaps even extra-legal, collective action to secure ‘an expansion of the freedoms of people’. Whilst the radical mobilisation of the VCK in its movement stage conforms to Chatterjee’s analysis of ‘political society’, however, the party now finds itself frustrated by the complexities attending ‘political arrival’. Seeking to establish their legitimacy and cement political alliances, the VCK makes demands of the state that are repeatedly thwarted by dominant caste groups. Attempts to raise their flag-pole alongside those of other parties; efforts to insert their imagery into the pantheon of roadside images; and efforts to mimic the political culture of the state by showcasing and celebrating their symbols are all met with physical or structural (the construction of walls) violence.

For all the current emphasis on virtual public spheres, Parkinson (2009: 101) cautions that ‘physical public space matters to democracy, and that neglecting the physical can have detrimental consequences for a democratic society’s health’. The data presented here supports this position. Whilst some Dalit activists dismiss temple entry as an irrelevance because ‘we are not Hindu anyway’ (X-Ray Manikam Interview, June 2012), therefore, I contend that the continued contestation of spaces of exclusion and discrimination is vital to Indian democracy. As Rawat (2013: 1064) insists, the continuing refusal by dominant groups to acknowledge Dalit entitlements to common resources perpetuates caste boundaries and modalities of exclusion. In their sustained struggles to render ‘public space’ more representative, Dalit parties emphasise the everyday experiences of caste that mark their lives. This incurs the wrath of intermediate but dominant castes who resent their waning influence, but simultaneously cements Dalits’ place within political institutions and alters the look and feel of social space. In metaphorically and physically emerging ‘out of the *cheris*’ to stake a claim to public space, Dalit movements are both challenging their continued marginalisation and reconfiguring social relations and spaces in India.

## References

- Adas, M. 1991. ‘South Asian Resistance in Comparative Perspective’, in D. Haynes, & G. Prakash (ed.), *Contesting Power*, Delhi: O.U.P: pp290-305
- Ambedkar, B. R. 2011. *Annihilation of Caste*. Nagpur: Prabuddha Bhart Pustkalya
- Barnett, M. R. 1976. *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton University Press
- Basu, R. S. 2011. *Nandanar’s Children*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Bate, B. 2009. *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- De Neve, G and Carswell, G. 2011. ‘NREGA and the Return of Identity Politics in Western Tamil Nadu, India’, *Forum for Development Studies* 38(2): pp205-210
- Dinamani. 2011. ‘Marxist organizer, MLA and 1,081 people arrested’, *Dinamani* (Daily Times, Tamil newspaper) 01 February 2011: Retrieved

- from Dalit Resource Centre Archive, Madurai.
- Donner, H and De Neve, G. 2006. 'Space, Place and Globalisation', in G. De Neve and H. Donner (eds): *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*, London, UCL Press: pp1-20
- Dreyfus, H and Rabinow, P. 1982. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*: Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Evidence. 2012. 'Preliminary Report (into Dharmapuri violence)', *Evidence Report* (Accessed 01 March 2013):  
[http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/India/2012/Dharmapuri\\_Dalit\\_Atrociti\\_Preliminary\\_Report.pdf](http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/India/2012/Dharmapuri_Dalit_Atrociti_Preliminary_Report.pdf)
- Gambeeran, Y; Yazhan Aadhi; Umadevi, K; Kannan, S and Mahendran, N. 2012. 'Dharmapuri violence: Caste rage, devastation and looting', *Round Table India* 17 December 2012. (Accessed 07 October 2013):  
[http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6052:fact-finding-teams-report-on-dharmapuri-caste-pillage&catid=122&Itemid=138](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6052:fact-finding-teams-report-on-dharmapuri-caste-pillage&catid=122&Itemid=138) Translated by Ratna Mala.
- Gamson, W. 1990. *The Strategy of Social Protest*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Gorringe, H. 2005. *Untouchable Citizens*. New Delhi: Sage
- Gorringe, H 2006: 'Establishing Territory' in De Neve, G and Donner, H (eds): *The Meaning of the Local*, London, UCL Press: pp44-67
- Gorringe, H. 2012. 'Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu', *Seminar* 633 (May 2012): pp38-42  
[http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633\\_hugo\\_gorringe.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_hugo_gorringe.htm)
- Hansen, T. B. 2004. 'Politics as Permanent Performance', in J. Zavos, A. Wyatt and V. Hewitt (eds): *The Politics of Cultural Mobilisation in India*. New Delhi: Oxford: pp19-36
- Harvey, D. 1989. *The Urban Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hindu, The. 2012. 'Not just intermediate groups on our side, others too: Ramadoss', *The Hindu Online* 28 December 2012 (Special Correspondent): Accessed 19/01/2015:  
<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/not-just-intermediate-groups-on-our-side-others-too-ramadoss/article4247681.ece>
- IDSN. 2012. 'Case: The Dharmapuri Attacks', *International Dalit Solidarity Network* (Accessed 07 October 2013):  
[http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user\\_folder/pdf/New\\_files/EU/2012/EP\\_resolution\\_2012\\_-\\_case\\_2.pdf](http://idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/EU/2012/EP_resolution_2012_-_case_2.pdf)
- Imranullah, M 2012. "'Uthapuram wall is no Berlin wall'", *The Hindu* 21 March 2012. Available online (Accessed 07 March 2013):  
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/article3024288.ece>
- Jaoul, N. 2006. 'Learning the Use of Symbolic Means', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 40(2): pp175-207
- Jayaharan, J. 2009. 'Dalit resource centre', in M. Gnanavaram (ed) *The TTS Annual Report 2008-2009*; pp 83-97: Madurai: TTS
- Jeffrey, C. 2001. 'A Fist is stronger than Five fingers.' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26(2): pp217-236.
- Karthikeyan, D. 2012. 'Uthapuram Dalits take part in temple consecration', *The Hindu* 30 June

- 2012: (Accessed 07 March 2013):  
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/article3585933.ece>
- Karthikeyan, D. 2013a. 'Dalit Advocates Forum Sees Foul Play in not installing name board', *The Hindu* 26 Feb 2013 (Accessed 26 Feb 2013):  
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/dalit-advocates-forum-sees-foul-play-in-not-installing-name-board/article4454737.ece>
- Karthikeyan, D. 2013b. 'Big, Bold and not so Beautiful', *The Hindu* 6 March 2013: (Accessed 07 March 2013): <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/big-bold-and-not-so-beautiful/article4481263.ece>
- Karthikeyan, D & Gorringer, H. 2012. 'Rescuing Ambedkar', *Frontline* 29(19): (Accessed 01 March 2013):  
<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/thscrip/print.pl?file=20121005291913600.htm&date=fl2919/&prd=fline&>
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Lefort, C. 1988. *Democracy & Political Theory*. Trans. D. Macey. Cambridge: Polity
- Low, M. 2009. 'Cities as Spaces of Democracy', in R. Geenens and R. Tinnevelt (eds.) *Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space*. Dordrecht: Springer: pp115-132.
- Loynd, M. 2009. 'Understanding the Bahun Samaj Prerna Kendra: Space, Place and Political Mobilisation', *Asian Studies Review* 33(4): pp469-482
- Mendelsohn, O & Vicziany, M. 1998. *The Untouchables*. Cambridge: C.U.P
- Mitchell, L. 2011. "'To Stop train pull chain": Writing histories of contemporary political practice', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 48(4): pp469-95
- Mitchell, L. 2014. 'The Visual Turn in Political Anthropology and the Mediation of Political Practice in Contemporary India', *South Asia* 37(3): pp515-540
- Pandian, M.S.S. 2013. 'Caste in Tamil Nadu II: Slipping Hegemony of Intermediate Castes', *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(4): pp13-15
- Parkinson, J. 2009. 'Does Democracy Require Physical Public Space?' In R. Geenens and R. Tinnevelt (eds.) *Does Truth Matter? Democracy and Public Space*. Dordrecht: Springer: pp101-114
- Rajangam, S. 2011. 'Rise of Dalit Movements and the Reaction of Dravidian Parties', in K. Satyanarayana and S. Tharu (eds.) *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. Translated by M. Parthasarathi. New Delhi: Penguin: pp238-245.
- Rao, A. 2009. *The Caste Question*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black
- Ravikumar. 2009. *Venomous Touch*, translated by R. Azhagarasan. Kolkata: Samya.
- Rawat, R. 2013. 'Occupation, Dignity, and Space: The Rise of Dalit Studies', *History Compass* 11: pp1059–1067
- Shields, R. 1991. *Places on the Margin*. London: Routledge
- Srinivas, M. 1966 (2009). *Social Change in Modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan
- Subramanian, N. 1999. *Ethnicity & Populist Mobilization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Teltumbde, A. 2012. 'Attack On Dalits Of Dharmapuri: A Fact Finding Report', *CounterCurrents.Org* 06 December 2012 (Accessed 07 October 2013):  
<http://www.countercurrents.org/teltumbde061212.htm>
- Theekathir 2011. 'Uthapuram Dalit people's Demands very unexceptional', *Theekathir* (FireBrand – the Tamil organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). 08 February 2011: Retrieved from Dalit Resource Centre Archive,



Madurai.

Thorat, S and Newman, K (eds.) 2010. *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Vincentnathan, S. 1996. 'Caste, Politics & the Panchayat'. *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 38(3): pp484-502

Waghmore, S. 2013. *Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: Sage

---

**Acknowledgements:** A version of the paper was presented in March 2013 at the Contested Spaces workshop in Penn. I am indebted to Michael Collins and Lisa Mitchell for organising the event and for comments from Thomas Blom Hansen and other participants. I am to the reviewer for detailed comments.

<sup>1</sup> Scheduled Caste (SC) is the constitutional epithet for ex-Untouchables. It refers to the schedule (list) of castes entitled to positive discrimination (reservations). Several 'touchable' castes also receive reservations: Backward Castes (BCs) and Most Backward Castes (MBCs) are low castes many of whom face economic poverty. Several BC communities, however, are politically dominant in Tamil Nadu. The term SC excludes those who have converted to Christianity or Islam, so this paper uses the term Dalit.

<sup>2</sup> Data was collected over 10 months in 2012 during ESRC (Grant RES-062-23-3348) funded fieldwork in and around Madurai District, central Tamil Nadu.

<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar was the pre-eminent Dalit leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the first Law Minister of India.

<sup>4</sup> Official label for castes who are neither Dalits nor Tribals but suffer from social, educational and economic deprivation and receive reservations.

<sup>5</sup> This information derives from conversations with journalists and activists who went to Natham Colony and from fact-finding reports into the incidents (Gambeeran et al 2012; ISDN 2012; Teltumbde 2012).

<sup>6</sup> The Madurai based NGO *Evidence* (2012) offers a list of 18 incidents between 1995 and 2011 of large scale attacks on Dalit settlements in Tamil Nadu. This list excludes election violence in 1999 (see Gorringe 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See here for an example of J. Guru's speeches. This comes from an all night meeting during the Tamil month of Cittirai (mid-April to mid-May) and was screened on *Makkal TV* (People's TV) which is owned by the PMK (Accessed 19/01/2015): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nPDu6skmCE&feature=share>

<sup>8</sup> *Theekathir* (Firebrand) is the Tamil organ of the CPM and *Dinamani* (Daily Times) is a daily Tamil newspaper owned by the Indian Express Group.